

Stan Brakhage 1,2,3,4,

Stan Brakhage, now in his fifties, is the preeminent American experimental film artist. From his initial fame as a young genius of the avant garde and a leading polemicist in establishing independent film among the arts in the early Sixties, he has moved to a position of seniority and recognition, if not universal acclaim. The American federation of Arts bestowed official acknowledgement of Brakhage as a film artist by giving him the first one-person retrospective in their prestigious series of packaged film programs aimed at the museum audience. His major writings since *Metaphors on Vision*, 19563, now appear in a hefty anthology, *Brakhage scrapbook*, and his prolific film output continues to inspire programmers and critics. His occasional one-person shows in major venues are always important events in the experimental film calendar. And after years of making a living for himself and his family by lecturing and teaching as a commuter, he has a regular position in his Rocky Mountain home area at the University of Colorado.

Stan Brakhage has done more than any other filmmaker in history to explore the expressive potential of silent, color, non-dramatic film. He has done this by pushing the concept of film as self-expression and self-exploration to its limits. The camera eye is the creative I. The unique moment of perception, the phenomenology of the perceptual field, and its connection with and mediation of personal and public life, the individual and the social extensions of perception, cognition, and memory, are all explored by Brakhage. In this he belongs among the great pioneers of visual and cinematic knowledge, and his place in the film medium's aesthetic history is secure. Brakhage has achieved this position by severely limiting the medium's usual communicative function and by pursuing the ethos of the individual Romantic artist struggling to obtain an inner vision in a

degraded historical world. Thus Brakhage rightly belongs at the center of Sitney's Visionary Film, for in both example and achievement, Brakhage stands as the great master of experimental film in the U.S.

But for those who reject visionary Romanticism as a sufficient or desirable artistic mode, Brakhage remains the supreme example of an idealist artist alienated from social and political reality, a patriarch whose present prestige (there is precious little power to be traded in the film avant garde) stands in the way of their newer experimental developments.

What Brakhage represents is the achievement of a certain phase of the New American Cinema at a time when the hegemony of the visionary style is being challenged. If for no other reason than his prestige, historical place, and prolific production, Brakhage remains the starting point for any encompassing assessment of U.S. experimental film today. Even those who want to dismiss him, as Jonathan Rosenbaum did in the first volume of this series, find that they cannot ignore him. But how are we to understand and assess his work remains a problem to be worked out, especially if we find his own statements and those of his admiring commentators questionable. This is especially so if we find the (usually) uniformed dismissal of Brakhage equally questionable. My task in this chapter, then, is to get beyond the legend to see the film work anew--to find a radical aesthetic sufficient for the films.

### The Legend

I've never met or observed Stan the man, but I know very well Stan the legend from the films, the writings, the criticism, and of course from that staple of art world communication, the gossip. In terms of understanding his art, the legend is essential, for Brakhage has created and perpetuated his own mythology (a necessary and inevitable act) and made it central to his own film work. This is distinctly disturbing within a formalist critical climate because

formalism begins with rejecting the artist's biography, with discarding as irrelevant any statement or notion of intention. The text is supposed to stand alone and reveal itself by its own exquisite logic, by close study of its formal qualities and arrangements. For example, we never need to know if the loft in *Wavelength* is Michael Snow's or someone else's, or if the people who appear in the film are friends, family, or paid actors. It doesn't matter if Snow took the photo on the far wall or not. But it matters very much that we know in the *Sincerity* films that this is the Brakhage family and that this is their log cabin in Colorado. Similarly, Hollis Frampton's *Zorn's Lemma* can be adequately (if not fully) dissected and understood without any knowledgeable or reference to Frampton's personal life. But we can't fully comprehend *Window Water Baby Moving* without knowing that the woman depicted is Jane Brakhage, the filmmaker's wife, and that the man's face we see at the end is Stan filmed by her. And in fact knowing even more than that was thought important by both of them. Thus Jane Brakhage writes an essay for *Film Culture*, "The Birth Film," about the experience; and the long interview with Stan introducing his major essay, *Metaphors on Vision*, contains an extended discussion of the film's making.

We can understand most of Brakhage's films only through the biography and the critical-theoretical apparatus he's put forth--either directly as in his writings, interviews, and public statements, or indirectly through the privileged knowledge of his critics. For example, Marjorie Keller's close reading of *Murder Psalm* depends on her extra-textural knowledge gained as one of Brakhage's students, as she herself notes. For those outside the legend, they experience many Brakhage films as baffling at best and frequently they turn back on the work and its maker in rejection.

Rejection of a (sometimes) more informed variety marks many left and feminist reactions to Brakhage. Jonathan Rosenbaum polemically attacks Brakhage's work and legend.

I am still waiting...for a critique of Brakhage that begins to deal critically with the familial, patriarchal, and phallogocentric side of his work and the reactionary political stance that inevitably derives from it.

And he expands the charge with a critique of a sort of metaphysical conceit underlying the whole American avant-garde romantic tradition--a central aspect of the work of Brakhage, Noren, Benning, Jost, Robert Nelson, and countless others, which reduces the universe to a list of male possessions: This is my wife, my child, my gun, my camera, my house, my car, my summer vacation, my life. And while the possessiveness of Mekas (and accompanying self-aggrandizement) has relatively little of the offensiveness--and much less of the formal complexity--of Brakhage, it still rests on an unproblematical embrace of The Essential Verities that are somehow taken to be outside all history and ideology, an assumption of innocence that cannot help but give off a certain whiff of complacency even while it makes a certain form of simplicity and poetic insight possible.

There are several important matters here for Rosenbaum's argument is substantial though terse. Because my book is in part an extended meditation on the present possibilities of romantic aesthetics and practices and their political significance, it will gradually become clear why and where I differ. In brief, my argument assumes that romanticism is inherent to the bourgeois and capitalist era. It will not be decisively superseded as a set of artistic options and concerns until capitalism itself is superseded. Even within existing socialism's context, romanticism remains a viable aesthetic possibility, though not the only one. Subsequent artistic reactions to the strictly defined Romantic movement never

really overcome the basic ideological structures and stances of romanticism. Even those twentieth century film artists who seem to reject most decisively the baggage of romanticism and its later transformation into realism, such as (in Rosenbaum's pantheon) Chantal Akerman, Peter Gidal, Yvonne Rainer, Michael Snow, and Jean-Marie Straub and Danielle Huillet (to take only the most self and critically proclaimed anti-romantic and anti-realist figures the critic praises) turn out to be refractory cases still fitting the overall paradigm.

Born in the 19th century, Romanticism fully flowers in the 19th, and works out its various possibilities, including those specific sub-movements that claim to be anti-romantic. For all intents and purposes, the 20th century displays the extension, expansion, and repetition of those forms and norms. Because of this, the basic premise of Sitney's Visionary Film can make so much sense: the American film avant garde from 1943 to 1978 repeats and encapsulates the internal developmental pattern of romantic poetry (particularly British poetry, following Sitney's mentor critic, Harold Bloom). Ontogeny repeats phylogeny.

Romanticism, the art paradigm of the capitalist era, arising in reaction to previous art traditions, changed the meaning of art and its role in society as well as the role of the artist. It stressed the unique individual and his/her achievements. By promoting singularity and individualism, making the person the measure rather than his or her family, lineage, or property, individual creativity and originality were stressed over adherence to tradition, accepted rules or imitation of past masters in art. Because it valued individual consciousness and subjectivity, it privileged the private part of perception, cognition, and memory. Dream and fantasy and eventually the unconscious were recognized as valid personal experiences and artistic materials. From the ecstatic disorientation or fulfilled love in Goethe's young Werther to the

intoxicated reveries of DeQuincy's opium eater, forms of altered perception and heightened experience were validated: physical and religious ecstasy, love, drugs, art, fevered illness. Against the regularity and uniformity of no-classicism, the fragmented, incomplete, mixed, and grotesque were celebrated. Against the assumption that the general social order is the primary place of self-understanding, the Romantics from Wordsworth to Thoreau found nature the site of self-examination.

Validating the personal produced a new recognition by male artists of the domestic sphere as the center of personal life and thereby part of art. Additionally, previously ignored segments of the population were included in the acceptable subject matter for art. In addition to rulers, aristocrats, military figures and merchants, ordinary people--workers and peasants--were depicted, though often by strongly sentimentalizing their poverty and harsh physical labor and conditions. For the first time childhood was recognized as a special state of life, free from some of the imposed restraints of social rules for adults. The allure of exoticism was added to national and racial difference and non-Western people were seen as interesting, child-like primitives.

In ideological terms the effect of this validation of the personal and the expression of private experience as the place individuals outside of power, apart from the public sphere, for their self-definition. The personal was the starting point for the political. The democratic state, it was claimed, existed to promote the pursuit of happiness. While romanticism contained a strong attack on rationalism and organized religion, it also held to a new mystical moral-aesthetic sensibility. Some of this produced an nostalgia for the past which could be paired with a sense of the future as void. Romanticism could be oriented to an eventual return to religion through a mystical view of nature, belief in the supernatural, or the practice of ritualized devotion.

In this context Brakhage can be seen as a quintessentially romantic artist. His various writings could serve as a handbook of romantic dogma.

Imagine an eye unruly by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure in perception. How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of "Green?" How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye? How aware of variations in heat waves can they eye be? Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible gradations of color. Imagine a world before the "beginning was the word."--Metaphors on IVision.

My first instruction , then: if you happen to have a light meter--give it away....--A Motion Picture Giving and Taking Book.

stan four

The most sophisticated and complete validation of Brakhage's work comes from critics like Fred Camper and Marjorie Keller who approach Brakhage with some distance from the mythology of the maker as legend and supreme authority on his own work (the problem of Sitney's general approach--one always thinks that Sitney has accepted Brakhage at face value as presented by the maker.) For example, in discussing Song I3 Camper points out that it is a film about cinema (hallmark of the modernist phase of romantic art), that it is about landscape and specifically the theme of wilderness vs. civilization, the machine in the garden, those long traditional American themes, and that it is reflexive of the filmmaker's own presence, literally because the window he is shooting through at times produces a reflection of the filmmaker, and thus gives us his

image trace as well as his presence as the holder and operator of the camera. The film is also rhythmically sophisticated, with an externally produced flicker effect, as well as a rhythm as well in the splicing of the 8mm film which puts a horizontal bar across the screen at each splice, and a certain personal obscurity as well, implied if not activated, by the referential elements.

description of film: shooting though the window of a moving train which is sometimes seeing a landscape of flat plains, and sometimes looking out on other trains which are passing or being passed at different speeds, and

which we sometimes see through to the landscape beyond. The camera seems to be moving from right to left through the landscape and this direction of movement is continued in the two short different section which conclude the film, one being shot from a car of trees and houses with the car stopping at at the end of that shot, and a shot out of an airplane of sky and claud formations.

Camper makes a good case for the value of the piece lying in its density, and he even extends the discussion to a comparison with late Cezanne landscapes, occupying a position between the impressionist movement and the cubist movement in painting. The density of artistic concern, the complex organic unity of the piece, for Camper marks its 1uality.

at the same time, Bill Stamets film dah dah has the same features and could be argued for in the same way